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Book Reviews

Letters Reveal Real Pasternak

THE CORRESPONDENCE OF BORIS PASTERNAK AND OLGA FREIDENBERG 1910-1954. Compiled and edited, with an introduction, by Elliott Mossman; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 365 pp., $19.65.

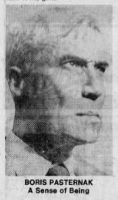
By CHARLES A. BRADY
News Book Reviewer

BORIS PASTERNAK and his cousin, Olga Freidenberg, were born in the same year, 1890. He died in 1960, a Nobel laureate, known to the world for his poetry and for his novel, "Dr. Zhivago." She had died five years before, a distinguished academic in the field of ancient Greek poetry.

Over a period of 44 years, except for the jagged gap in communication caused by World War I, the two cousins corresponded together. Supplemented by excerpts from Olga Freidenberg's Diary, this book is the record of that long and fruitful epistolary exchange.

As has become abundantly clear over the past several decades, Boris Pasternak, for all his literary genius and his genuine idealism, was no hero, except, of course, in the Carlylean sense of his being the hero-as-man-of-letters. One might argue, however, that she most distinctly was a heroine.

He shilly-shallied and evaded taking overt stands in the face of the Soviet monolith. Not so his dauntless cousin. When, in 1935, the Party asked her "to lower the marks of children of white-collar workers and raise those of the children of blue-collar workers," she "refused point blank." The result was a bitter attack against her status in the University; but she stuck to her guns.



BORIS PASTERNAK
A Sense of Being

Behind the facade of Pasternak's official persona, underneath the great bronze bust of the genius, moved a complex human person, one who comes through the epistolary mask most vividly. "You are a queer duck, Borya!" she wrote.

As he himself said to Stephen Spender in a 1950 letter from which Professor Mossman quotes, his "greatest satisfaction came from achieving a feeling of the meaning and sense of reality ... the very atmosphere of being ..." His letters are a by-product of that same delicate discrimination of essential being's inner reality.

While Pasternak's letters are continuously fascinating, Olga Freidenberg grasps real events more firmly than he. The letters and diary entries, which detail the siege of Leningrad, are especially gripping. So is her somber evocation of the Yezhov terror under Stalin. When the Germans attack Russia in the summer of 1941, her view of the war's antecedents is totally unclouded by extraneous emotion and she speaks of "these two tyrants throwing themselves at each other's throats."

At the same time, despite the constant bombing and unremitting artillery onslaughts, she never lays aside her critical preoccupations. "I am passionately interested in the progress of the war," she writes to her cousin. "But I still buy flowers and write about Homeric similes."

LESS THAN five years before her death, she found a new use for an old Russian word and applied it to describe the Soviet's revolution of mediocrity:

"Wherever you looked, in all our institutions, in all our homes, skloka was brewing. Skloka is a phenomenon born of our social order, an entirely new term and concept, not to be translated into any language of the civilized world. It is hard to define. It stands for base, trivial hostility, unconscionable spite breeding petty intrigues, the vicious pitting of one clique against another. It thrives on calumny, informing, spying, scheming, slander, the igniting of base passions ... Skloka is the alpha and omega of our politics. Skloka is our method."

It was a far cry from 1908-1909, the youthful years when Boris Pasternak, fresh from the Gymnasium, began to court Olga Freidenberg and was rejected by her. They never became lovers; and they never fell out of love. "History boils our teakettle for us," she told him in 1942. The scent still coils upward from the samovar of this vital correspondence between two equal souls.

Jews in America

JEWISH LIFE IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICA: Challenge and Accommodation, by Milton Plesur; Nelson Hall, Chicago, 236 pp. $19.95 cloth; $9.95 paper.

Dr. Milton Plesur a professor of history at the State University of Buffalo, has added to the shelf-full of volumes which attempt to deal with the sociological phenomena of one of America's most-studied minorities, the Jews.

His 15-page annotated bibliography is an indication of the wealth of material already published on the subject.

Dr. Plesur deals with the progress which immigrant Jews, mostly from Eastern Europe, made in this country from the ghetto to suburbia, from being an easily distinguished group to becoming indistinguishable from other Americans of similar social status.

Although one can identify a Jewish community in this country, "there is no question that its members are part of the larger American culture," he writes.

Dr. Plesur takes pains to point out the contributions of Jewish citizens to their country in many fields, often in spite of anti-semitic attitudes, as well as dealing with the way Jewish institutions and practice has accommodated to American, terming it one of the "most positive and creative aspects of the entire saga of the Jewish people." — E.S.

AXIS LEADERS — Mussolini and Hitler, left.

The Mad Prince Who Ruled Italy

MUSSOLINI, by Denis Mack Smith; Knopf, $20.

By LORENZO CARCATERRA
New York Daily News

HE WAS THE madman prince of Italy. In 1922, he took over a country bending from the pain of poverty and brought it to life, giving it strength, power, respect. In April of 1945, he was dead, hanging from his heels in Milan's Piazzale Loreto, his nation destroyed by war, ravaged by hunger, wracked with anger and guilt.

As British historian Denis Mack Smith points out in his fascinating if tedious biography, "Mussolini," Il Duce accomplished many things for a nation desparately in need of leadership, of a man to look up to.

No amount of good, however, can ever make up for Mussolini's murderous policies, his sneering strategies and presumptious thinking that led millions of Italians to believe that they were destined for world rule, chosen to be glorious leaders instead of the simple hard workers they truly were.

The book is anything but an easy read. It moves slowly, covering the minute details of Mussolini's life, beginning with his childhood — he was virtually a delinquent — and moving through his later years in which he demonstrated the tactics and manner of a common street thug.

Despite Smith's annoying penchant for exposing Il Duce's every tick, and despite the awkward writing style here, "Mussolini" is a biographical achievement, required reading for anyone interested in the inner workings of a man apparently born mad, who lived powerfully and died pathetically.

Benito Andrea Amilcare Mussolini was porn as poor as can be imagined on July 29, 1883, outside the small village of Predappio in the Romagna region of Italy. He grew wild, unconcerned with simple civilities, prone to violent reactions, content to bring discussions to an end with a vicious swing of his fist. He had few friends — a trait he maintained throughout his life — and trusted no one.

In his later years, he would lie about his background, passing himself off as an excellent student, an in industrious young man. In point of fact, he was lazy, crude and unable to hold a full-time job in any occupation he tried.

The war, the deviousness of his generals, the treachery of his inner circle, all combined to bring Mussolini to his ignominious end, an end not even his most bitter enemies foresaw.

Politics and women seemed to be his only passion, and he spent most of his early manhood trying his best to conquer both. That he did is a credit more to the times he lived in than to the prowess of the man himself.

Smith credits Mussolini with being the true leader of the fascist movement, calling fellow dictator Adolph Hitler, a mere follower. He goes so far as to suggest that Hitler would not have considered the risks of a World War had he not had the Italian leader as a trusted ally.

Today, ironically, Benito Mussolini is looked upon with fondness by an older generation of Italians, for whom the passage of time has muted the memories of war and increased the nostalgia for a simpler era when Italy was, for an ever-so-brief period, in its glory.

World of Suspense

New-Style Sleuth Probes the Soul

THE CASE OF LUCY BENDING, by Lawrence Sanders; Putnam, 440 pp., $14.95.

Lawrence Sanders, who's written several bestselling crime novels, has a new kind of detective in "The Case of Lucy Bending."

He's a bearded, rumple-suited child psychiatrist named Levin, and the mean streets down which he must prowl are the labyrinths of the human psyche.

SANDERS

The novel is built on the framework of Levin's attempt to discover why a beautiful 8-year-old girl named Lucy Bending is hypersexual, to the consternation and embarrassment of her parents.

Lucy is the product, and victim, of her environment, the tropical Gold Coast of south Florida, and before Levin finds his answer, Sanders has given us a chilling, wide-angle view of a subculture whose worship of money, power and hedonism leaves no place for human and family values.

We meet Lucy's womanizing father who cruises pick-up bars after business hours in his Porsche 924 Turbo; Lucy's puritanical mother, hiding her self-revulsion in born-again Christianity, and the Bendings' beachfront neighbors — the sexually predatory Empts and the Holloways, a weak-willed banker and his cheating, devious, opportunistic wife.

Sanders hurls his cast together in a sun-drenched melee of illegal business deals, too much money, homosexuality, booze, pot and cocaine. They're a pack of desperate people living hyped-up, abandoned, meaningless, unfulfilled lives.

Everything in "The Case of Lucy Bending" builds toward terrible catastrophe, a climax as stunning as it is, perhaps, inevitable.

In this fictional view of la dolce vita American style, Sanders, in a colorful, gripping novel of psychological suspense, is saying that, in the battle to save its soul, portions of our society have already surrendered. — E.K.

GOODBYE, CHICAGO, by W.R. Burnett; St. Martin's Press, 175 pp., $9.95.

The author of "Little Caesar" returns to the milieu he knows so well, the underworld of the late '20s, in this crisp crime novel about a slain wife of a police officer who wasn't what she seemed. — E.K.

A STAB IN THE DARK, by Lawrence Block; Arbor House, 192 pp., $10.95.

Private 'tec Matt Scudder probes the case of a mass-murder victim and comes up with unsettling answers. Deftly done. — E.K.

AIR GLOW RED, by Ian Slater; Doubleday, 346 pp., $13.95.

Time's running out. Fuel's dwindling and the Solar Satellite Program may be the only answer to U.S. energy problem. Trouble is, everyone wants SSP — and is willing to kill for it. — E.K.

NOT A BLESSED THING!, by Monica Quill, Vanguard, 192 pp., $9.95.

If rabbis, priests and ministers can be mystery sleuths, why not nuns? Behold! Sister Mary Teresa solves a dilly. — E.K.

SATURDAY OF GLORY, by David Serafin; St. Martin's Press, 224 pp., $9.95

Dogged, aging Madrid police officer suspects political murder, not suicide, when a newsman tumbles to his death from an apartment terrace in the Spanish capital. Winner of the John Creasey Memorial Prize in Britain for best crime novel. — E.K.

A CRACKING OF SPINES, by Roy Harley Lewis; St. Martin's Press, 207 pp., $10.95.

Former military intelligence agent doesn't find anonymity or ease he's searching for when he opens an antiquarian book shop in rural England. He finds, instead, mayhem and murder. — E.K.

MURDER IN THE SUPREME COURT, by Margaret Truman; Arbor House, 284 pp., $12.95.

The former president's daughter, in her third stab at the mystery novel, proves her earlier successes, "Murder in the White House" and Murder on Capitol Hill," were far from flukes.

Before we learn who did in the chief justice's clerk, Miss Truman has whisked us through passages of power she knows first hand and entertained us with clever sleuthing and crisp dialogue.

Because Washington is almost infinite in famous places, the author fortunately will never run out of backgrounds for her fictional killings. — E.K.

'Voice' Survives Poor Anthology

THE VILLAGE VOICE ANTHOLOGY (1956-1980), edited by Geoffrey Stokes; Morrow, 331 pp., $15.50, $7.50 paper.

THE REDNECK WAY OF KNOWLEDGE: Down Home Tales, by Blanche McCrary Boyd; Knopf, 160 pp., $10.95.

By JEFF SIMON
News Book Reviewer

THE VILLAGE VOICE is the best cultural periodical in America. It has both outrageously readable cheekiness and intellectual depth, a balance so peculiar and precarious that you'd think the slightest draft might send it tumbling to oblivion.

Only Esquire, in its '60s prime, has come close, although for all its wit, irreverence and ingratiating journalistic improv, Esquire never illuminated academic arcana or explored the wild cultural fringe as devotedly as the Voice has.

In consequence, the appeal of the Voice has become surprisingly wide.

Just a few weeks ago, for instance, Voice book reviewer Eliot Fremont-Smith reviewed the controversial "The G Spot and Other Sexual Discoveries" by concocting a lunatic, hilarious raging dialogue between the two much-polemicized anatomical centers of female erotic life.

The Voice is so good that even Geoffrey Stokes couldn't ruin it as editor of this first anthology of the best from the Voice's pages. Heaven knows he tried. He botched the job at ever turn. Half of the book's 330 pages are virtually worthless. But the other half contains some of the best or most important writing that's been done recently in America.

It isn't as if he didn't understand what's wonderful about The Voice: "Under the leadership of Jerry Tallmer, who did a great deal of writing himself, the Voice virtually invented a new kind of cultural criticism. Tallmer and his crew managed to avoid both the high-brow style of academic journals and the determinedly lowbrow daily criticism without sinking into the offensive middlebrowness represented then (and still) by the Saturday Review ... By comparison the news pages were blandly suburban."

Not only that, news usually has a very short shelf life. Great criticism endures and even merely functional criticism tends to persist or have stubborn influence. With all that in mind, Stokes devotes a mere 50 pages to the Voice's critics. Add two more for a Stanley Crouch piece on Louis Armstrong in the "Blacks and Whites and Others" section and you still have less than one-sixth of the book.

With all that incompetence of selection, it's a small miracle that great work survived at all but that it did: James Wolcott's howlingly funny and definitive slander on literary symposia called "Knowledge is Good? Intellectuals Bomb Out of Town"; Lucian K. Truscott IV's definitive demolition of Alexander Haig; Jack Newfield's maudlin but unquestionably historic report on Bobby Kennedy's assassination; Edward Hoagland's moving "The Threshold and Jolt of Pain"; Ross Wetzsteon's reminiscence of Nabokov at Cornell and the always outrageous Richard Meltzer's suitably outrageous "Buy a VTR and Rule the World."

To see just how badly Stokes botched it you have only to read the wonderfully extreme "The Redneck Way of Knowledge" by Blanche McCrary Boyd, who is either the female Thomas McGuane, the female Harry Crews or American literature's first feminist, self-admitted lesbian good ole girl, depending on how you look at it. All of the 11 "down home tales" — about a Village bohemian who migrated to Manhattan from South Carolina and then went back home again — were originally published in the Voice.

For the anthology, Stokes chose one of the worst, presumably for its lesbian confessionalism, a trivial and, beyond that, profoundly tacky choice. Boyd is a wonderful writer who has fled the tumultuous commonplaces of bohemian life for the commonplace tumult of her native South Carolina she'd somehow missed the first time around. She is the kind of saucily idiosyncratic writer who has been nurtured for years by the Voice.

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Evolution of American Democracy

AMERICAN JOURNEY, by Richard Reeves; Simon and Shuster, 399 pp., $15.95.

By LAURENCE PAUL
News Book Reviewer

A MINOR French nobleman, Alexis de Tocqueville, arrived in the United States in 1831 for a curious look at Americans and their government. He traveled for nine months, taking copious notes on the people he interviewed and the impressions of what he heard and saw.

The result was Tocqueville's "Democracy in America," a two-volume classic that can still contribute to an understanding of this country and its people.

So 150 years later, Richard Reeves, a journalist whose syndicated columns appear on The News op-ed page periodically, has retraced the route Tocqueville took, interviewed dozens of people in those communities (including four in Buffalo) originally visited by Tocqueville with an eye for how we have changed and how stayed the same in terms of our ideas and values, and how Tocqueville's own keen insights of so long ago measure up today.

The result of Reeves' "American Journey" is one of the most engaging non-fiction books of the year. It is, quite simply, excellent.

The aristocratic and young Tocqueville, who had his doubts about democracy but was incurably fascinated by it, worried about the tyranny of the majority in America and what he thought would prove an inability of blacks and whites to "ever be brought anywhere to live on a footing of equality."

He despaired over the position of women in American society, especially along the frontier, and was skeptical that democracy could ever produce national excellence and "great enterprises."

Reeves agrees about the potential threat of a tyrannical majority in our democracy. But progress in race relations, and the status of women, among other things, leads Reeves to a confident optimism about democracy and a certainty that we are today a far more democratic nation than we were 150 years ago.

If Tocqueville had his doubts, he was also both generous and acute in his observations about this nation, its people and their values and government.

He marveled at the confidence and freedom of average, everyday people, their faith in education, their penchant for forming associations of cooperative self-interest that would solve problems and influence government.

Very early he saw the importance of courts and their role in promoting equality, a role that was explored in significance in recent years and is underscored by Reeves.

The two observers do not, of course, always agree. Tocqueville thought he saw an extraordinary tendency among Americans to faithfully observe the laws. "If those words were ever strictly true," writes Reeves, "they are not today,"

And while Americans still tend to apply morality to problems (support for human rights, for example), Reeves perceives a major shift in religious attitudes.

Indeed, he thinks the society has survived a transition "from Puritan Republic to some new kind of selfish democracy."

TOCQUEVILLE'S ROUTE — Included Buffalo.

In any measurement of a society, the serious observer must explore the relative importance accorded freedom and equality. In the church, which holds more value for that society's people?

"It is not that people with a democratic social state naturally scorn freedom; on the contrary they have an instinctive taste for it," Tocqueville wrote. "But freedom is not the chief and continual object of their desire; it is equality for which they feel an eternal love ... nothing will satisfy them without equality, they would rather die than lose it."

Considering conditions in 1831 and those today, that impression would seem much more true now than then.

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